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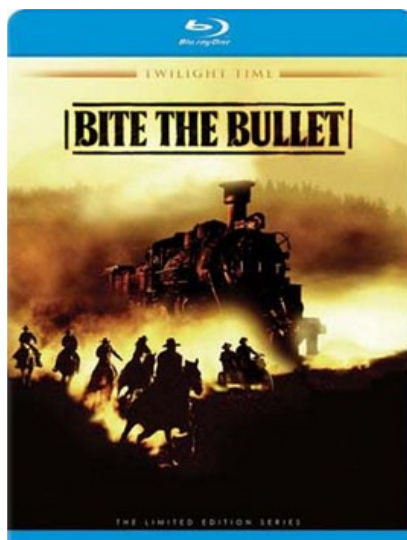
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Bite The Bullet
 (1975/Twilight Time Limited Edition Blu-ray)/**The Scarlet Worm**
 (2011/Unearthed Films/MVD Blu-ray)

Picture: B/B- Sound: B/C+ Extras: C+/C
 Films: C+/C

PLEASE NOTE: The **Bite The Bullet** Blu-ray is limited to 3,000 copies and is available exclusively at the Screen Archives website which can be reached at the link at the end of this review.



By the 1970s, the bottom fell out of Westerns. The Professional Western cycle was ending along with a wave of imitators of the Leone Spaghetti Westerns and John Wayne was about to end his acting reign even though Clint Eastwood occasionally delved into the genre. We now look at two different Westerns to see how this affected their outcome.

Richard Brooks is one of the underrated journeymen filmmaker who was also a great writer. Among his many successes were **In Cold Blood**, **Lord Jim**, **Sweet Bird Of Youth**, **Blackboard Jungle** and the 1966 Western **The Professionals**. In 1975, he returned to the genre with **Bite The Bullet** about a horse race contest with a big prize and each character having very different motives to make the run. Gene Hackman and James Coburn play old friends who become competitors for a (then) big cash prize, but they have competition in a British rider (Ian Bannen), young cocky upstart (Jan-Michael Vincent in his prime), old cowboy (Ben Johnson), surprise woman (Candice Bergen), a Mexican (Mario Arteaga) and a big money rider backed by a sarcastic so and so (Dabney Coleman).

Twilight Time has issued the film in a Limited Edition Blu-ray and though it runs a bit long at 131 minutes, the film holds up well as one of the last original Hollywood Westerns to hold up in any significant way. There are some fine performances, great locations and some memorable moments, but the film also gets sidetracked as well as allowing itself to get caught up in the moment one too many times (something Lucas and Spielberg would try to imitate with less success in their Indiana Jones films) and that interrupts the flow somewhat like a song out of nowhere. There are no intended "hit songs" inserted though.

It has been a long time since I have seen this one and the first time in widescreen since its theatrical release. It holds up well considering how the Western is mostly part of the past and having Hackman and Coburn against each other is a plus that works. Anyone who has never seen it should get this edition.

Extras include a DTS-MA 2.0 Stereo isolated music track of Alex North's solid score, the Original Theatrical Trailer and another nicely illustrated booklet on the film including informative text and essay by Julie Kirgo.

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Michael Fredianelli's **The Scarlet Worm** (2011) definitely has an affection for such Westerns and its counterparts in a tale with a promising idea trying to one-up Eastwood's **Unforgiven**: revenge on a sadistic brothel runner (Dan van Husen) who does inhumane, sick, forced abortions on his prostitutes! He is evil and therefore in the usual Western, he must pay!

Made by a group of friends who obviously love the genre, this was a project with much potential, but instead of reinventing the genre as you need to since the 1980s when you make entry into it, they get silly with retro Spaghetti Western graphics, get sidetracked too often and don't take the abortion situation seriously, showing this is made by males more interested in the revenge side of things (including bloody shootouts) trivializing the reason anyone is fighting to begin with.

That is sloppy and problematic, as the makers are too busy enjoying themselves (leaving the viewer out in the process) and producing a major missed opportunity in the genre to boot. At least I give them credit for trying and this is at least not as generic as so many of the bad TV movie Westerns (especially made in Canada for some reason) so it is by default the best independent Western I have seen in a while, but it ultimately does not work or stay with you once you see it. Too bad, because they had a good idea and missed the boat.

Extras include trailers, a Behind-The-Scenes featurette and two feature length audio commentary tracks (one with Writer David Lambert, the other with Actors/Producers Mike Malloy & Eric Zaldivar).

The 1080p 2.35 X 1 digital High Definition image transfer may have some expected grain and slight flaws at times, but this is a fine transfer of the original film shot in real 35mm anamorphic Panavision by Director of Photography Harry Stradling Jr. (**Little Big Man** (reviewed on Blu-ray elsewhere on this site), **The Way We Were**) uses the widescreen frame to a great extent, making this a true big screen picture with some fine shots and consistent composition throughout. Made to look naturalistic, some shots will seem soft, but are intended as such and this will look good on any HD set up. **Worm** tries to imitate such a look with the same scope frame, but it has motion blur, color limits and detail issues that hold it back along with some styling that backfires and seem clichéd.

The DTS-HD MA (Master Audio) 5.1 lossless mix is impressive, especially since this is an upgrade from an optical monophonic theatrical release, but the score was well recorded and the other sound elements are in good shape, so don't be surprised when they integrate as well as they do. The lossy Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo on **Worm** has hardly any surrounds, sounds on the digital side and is really crying out for a lossless track to match the visuals.

As noted above, **Bite The Bullet** can be ordered while supplies last at:

www.screenarchives.com

- Nicholas Sheffo



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